

EDITORIAL

James Easton's recent re-examination of the Arnold case, which suggests that the objects were probably pelicans, continues to arouse the wrath of American ETH ufologists, who see their favourite UFO reports gradually being disposed of, as none of them seem able to stand up to critical examination. Jerome Clark reacted to this new study by referring to ufologists who prefer natural explanations as 'pelicanists', even though he quotes Arnold in one of his encyclopedias as saying that the objects flew in the manner of geese. Apart from the predictable whingeing of the UFO believers, the argument mainly hinges on the question of whether or not Arnold correctly estimated the distance of the objects from his plane. This one will run for some time and it seems likely that the pelicanists will emerge as the winners.

BEES FROM A DYING PLANET

In support of the psychosocial hypothesis, a number of writers, notably Martin Kottmeyer, have shown how many of the motifs found in UFO reports, particularly abductions, have been derived from science fiction books and films. Even some of the believers have had to concede that science fiction has coloured the accounts given by many witnesses.

However, this leads to the question of how the science fiction writers got their ideas. In a recent book, Bruce Rux developed the idea that the process is really the other way around: science fiction writers get their ideas from genuine UFO reports. (1) Perhaps it would be more reasonable to consider the possibility of a two-way traffic between ufology and science fiction.

An interesting example of this can be found in *Star of Ill-Omen*, by Dennis Wheatley, a tale of alien abduction first published in 1952. (2) Wheatley (1897-1977), author of 75 books, was a writer of occult thrillers, perhaps the best known being *The Devil Rides Out*. He was noted for the research he conducted to give his fantastic stories authentic backgrounds, so that they often featured real people and real events. *Star of Ill-Omen* is rather different from his other works.

In this book, Wheatley not only makes use of his reading on UFOs, but he summarises it at tedious length. The story can briefly be summarised as follows:

Our hero, Kem Lincoln (a James Bond sort of character), a scientist Escobar and his wife Carmen - with whom Lincoln is having an affair - are captured by giant humanoid Martians and taken back to Mars in a flying saucer. It turns out that the humanoids are the not-very-bright slaves of a race of intelligent insects, which are referred to as 'bee-beetles'. As Mars is drying up, they plan to take over Earth, having blasted its population using atom bombs. Despite their technical sophistication, they have no idea how to manufacture these, so they hope to get nuclear physicist Escobar to show them. Eventually the abductees manage to destroy the Martian civilisation by discovering that the bee-beetles have no sting and conveying this information to the humanoids, who rebel and start killing them off. Our heroes manage to escape in a saucer and return to Earth.

This is surely one of Wheatley's less readable works. There are many pages where nothing much happens, especially on the tedious outward voyage to Mars, which takes about 50 days. One thus sees that the device of Lincoln having an affair with Escobar's wife is necessary to provide a little dramatic tension, although this only serves to make the voyage seem even more tedious than it would otherwise be.

There was not much UFO literature available when Wheatley wrote this book, so it should be possible to trace most of the details which he has borrowed from it. The bee-beetles obviously derive from the speculations of Gerald Heard, author of one of the first UFO books. (3) Having noted the

high speeds and rapid changes of direction described in many UFO reports, he hypothesised that they were piloted by intelligent insects, and that they probably came from Mars.

Another interesting detail is the idea that saucers are destroyed by bursting into flames if anything goes wrong, or in Wheatley's story, simply as a precaution against biological contamination. When the abductees reach Mars, they are sealed up in bags and ejected, and the saucer burns up. They are then subjected to a decontamination procedure. The idea of things being ejected from saucers comes from the Maury Island story. The burning saucer reminds one of the alleged Ubatuba magnesium incident, but that occurred in 1957, about 5 years after the book was first published.

In common with most modern abduction stories, the interior of the saucer has no ornamentation of any kind and everything in it is strictly functional. Another similarity is the vagueness about the saucer's propulsion system. Escobar speculates that it makes use of 'magnetic lines of force'.

The bee-beetles apparently have no art or culture, and they have great difficulty in communicating with other species. They use telepathy to some extent, particularly to control their humanoid slaves. They show their captives films, which seem to be a potted history of Earth civilisation, and include many scenes of wars and weapons. Our heroes eventually realise that they want to be shown how to make atom bombs. This reminds one of similar presentations given to abductees by the Greys (presumably with different motives), but in the early 1950s the Greys had yet to be invented.

When Wheatley and Heard wrote their books, it was still possible to consider Mars as a possible abode of intelligent life, with a reasonable amount of water and a possibly breathable atmosphere and this had an obvious influence on the speculations of UFO writers of the early 1950s. The following paragraph from Heard's book shows how wrong theories about Mars could be before the era of space exploration:

'The surface of Mars seems innocent of scars when we think of our own surface and that of the pockmarked moon, our satellite. Mars seems to have cooled before volcanic eruptions took place. Lowell thought that it had only one low range of mountains reaching the very moderate height of 3,000 feet, the Mountains of Mitchell near its southern pole. Had Mars been often hit - as many of the vast craters on the moon are now thought to be "bullet marks" made by meteorites that have struck full force on the moon-surface (unscreened by an atmosphere) - then on the Martian landscape we should have seen these great rampart rings - some on the moon are thirty miles across and throw most striking shadows. But not a trace of such has been detected on Mars.'

The story ends with Lincoln and Carmen returning to Earth in a saucer, where they are ejected in a capsule which falls into the Thames. The saucer explodes in flames. They are recovered and revived, as described in a document marked Top Secret. The Earth is saved but the public never get to hear about all this as it remains secret. Just like the crashed saucers and dead aliens at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base!

References

1. Rux, Bruce. *Hollywood Vs. the Aliens: The Motion Picture Industry's Participation in UFO Disinformation*, Frog Ltd, Berkeley, California, 1997
2. Wheatley, Dennis. *Star of Ill-Omen*, The Lymington Edition, Hutchinson, London, 1966 (first published 1952)
3. Heard, Gerald. *The Riddle of the Flying Saucers: Is Another World Watching?* Carroll & Nicholson, London, 1950

LITERARY CRITICISM

Reviews by Peter Rogerson

Tony Thorne. *Children of the Night: Of Vampires and Vampirism*, Victor Gollancz, 1999. £18.99

Broadcaster and academic Tony Thorne takes a look at the history of, and contemporary fascination with, the figure of the vampire, from roots in the classical world and medieval and early modern eastern Europe to today's Vampire sub culture. In his study of the latter he points out that they model themselves not on the fairly squalid folkloric original, but on the romantic, aristocratic vampire of literature and film. Some of these people claim a number of odd physical conditions. It is unclear whether these are essentially psychosomatic, or whether some people suffering from real physical complaints such as photosensitivity latch on to the vampire identity to give a positive, romantic gloss to their problems.

Thorne notes the appearance of new vampiric figures such as the Hispano-American *chupacabras*, and comments on the role of the alien abductor as the new monster of the liminal zone between sleep and waking. Each age has its own monsters. Ours merges traditional themes with elements of pseudo-science and science fiction.

Stuart Clark. *Life on Other Worlds and How to Find It*, Praxis/Springer Verlag, 2000. £16.95

This shortish (c. 150 pages of text) book by the director of public astronomy education at the University of Hertfordshire gives a general overview of the search for life on other planets, and follows most of the main ingredients of the recent brews. Clark also introduces many of the speciesist and ethno-historical chauvinist arguments which run through this sort of literature. He appears to understand that much of the appeal of the SETI project is religious, but himself introduces such metaphysical notions as the principle of plenitude, which he renders as meaning 'What can happen will happen'. If this is anything more than a tautology, it is obviously nonsensical. There is nothing in the laws of physics and mathematics to prevent John Rimmer from becoming prime minister or Dennis Stacy from becoming President, but that does not mean that either event will happen!

David Tame. *Real Fairies: True Accounts of Meetings with Nature Spirits*, Capall Bann, 1999. £9.95

While, despite the subtitle, much of this book is given over to occultist and new age speculation (30 of its 130 pages being devoted to the 'teachings' of Mark Prophet), there are some interesting accounts of 'fairy sightings'. Reinforcing David Sivier's point, several of these show clear cultural tracking, in that what are described are the winged gossamer creatures of 19th-century fairy illustration.

One account in here, of mysterious vehicle stoppages and accidents, along with sightings of 'little men', withered crops and the like at Broxted in Sussex, has more than a few echoes of the Stocksbridge affair reported by David Clarke in *Magonia* 33.

David Koerner and Simon LeVay. *Here Be Dragons: The Scientific Quest for Extraterrestrial Life*, Oxford University Press, 2000. £19.99

An astronomer and a biologist provide an overview of the current debate about ET life, and interview various key players on all sides of the various arguments going on in the field. Unlike some similar works, they keep their own personal views largely in the background, allowing the various factions to have their say.

This also means that this book does not simply repeat what half a dozen earlier ones have said in slightly different prose, but does give a fresher approach.

Allowing different people to have their say does, of course, reveal just how little is known about the many factors involved, and just how much speculation is little more than guesswork. There is no consensus as to how life on Earth began, the role of contingency in evolution, the range of conditions in which life might develop, how alien life might get, etc.

There is consensus, however, that UFO reports do not represent evidence for alien visitation, and, in a chapter devoted to ufology as a belief system, the authors talk to one of the members of the Sturrock Commission, and guess what his position is? UFOs of course have nothing to do with aliens, but it might be worth studying reports because among the dross might be reports of interesting natural phenomena. Far cry from the what the American Internet rumours were saying isn't it?

There isn't much joy for Michael Swords either, as there is a pretty good consensus that even if intelligent aliens exist, they wouldn't closely resemble us. Even David Conway Morris who rejects Stephen J. Gould's emphasis on the role of contingency, for much the same religious reasons as Swords, holds out no hope for human-looking aliens, and indeed doubts that aliens exist at all.

In many ways, though, reading the views of many of the participants in this field, I was still struck by their lack of imagination, their extreme difficulty in trying to envision 'aliens' who are something other than people of a different shape, who would share not just our species' but our own culture's dreams and ambitions. Indeed they are really looking even more narrowly than that: they are looking, in essence, for themselves out there, as if their dreams and hopes were the dreams and hopes of the entire universe, and that if they can't make it, someone, somewhere out there will. Perhaps that is the ultimate appeal of the SETI project and belief in alien visitors.

Robert M. Schoch and Robert Aquinas McNally. *Voices of the Rocks: Lost Civilisations and the Catastrophes which Destroyed Them*, Thorsons, 2000. £8.99

This book seems to be on a winner in that it links two very lucrative contemporary themes, apocalyptic speculation surrounding 'killer asteroids' and heterodox archaeology, centred around our old friend Egypt.

Schoch's main thesis, that the Sphinx is much older than conventional archaeologists believe, is an example of what might be called a medium-rank anomaly. If true it would not challenge any fundamental scientific principle. After all, the people of 10,000 BP were just as intelligent as ourselves, and Schoch is not evoking any paranormal magical technology, ancient astronauts and the like; on the other hand it is just about surprising enough for the scholarly community to demand really good evidence before they would so drastically revise their chronologies, and it is not at all clear that he has assembled such overwhelming evidence as yet.

At times, I got the feeling that Schoch, a geologist, doesn't quite grasp the passions and furies which drive history. At one point he argues that the conventional view that the mass burnings of many ancient Mediterranean cities were the result of war, invasion and rebellion, must be wrong, because why would rational invaders burn cities that they would want to use and exploit? Well, because invaders and revolutionaries are *not* usually rational; cities were burned and their inhabitants massacred out of pure ethnic or class hatred, and certainly many peasants did not want to live in the cities: they saw them as sinks of iniquity and vampiric tax gatherers, to be wiped off the face of the earth, not occupied.

The belief that destruction comes from the skies, and not from ourselves is a comforting one, but the other thesis, which challenges the notion of sustained, fast, single-track progress is less so. The notion that many times in, say, the last 30,000 years cultures have risen and fallen, most usually to peasant Jacques, of which Kampuchea and Rwanda were but the most recent, is pretty scary, evoking the possibility that ours might just go the same way, and the future might not be the Universal Denmark, but the Universal Somalia.

LETTER

This year sees a repetition of what we may designate the 'Four-yearly UFO Ritual'. It is as regular as the Olympic Games and the World Cup. This is the process whereby certain vociferous American ufologists seize the chance of putting to the various presidential candidates a question which runs something like: 'If elected will you ensure the military and the intelligence agencies release all their secret UFO files to the American people?'

The surprised candidate probably gives a blanket answer to the effect that yes, he believes strongly in the public having freedom of access to official records on such matters, if they exist, and that he or she will look into it.

Once elected, the new president soon finds that far more pressing domestic and foreign problems engulf him and his cabinet, and UFOs are either delegated, perhaps to some lowly disinterested official, or forgotten altogether.

Any files that are eventually released are inevitably disappointing and the eternal optimists among the US ETH fraternity suffer another round of frustration. The 'great truth' is still firmly sealed in locked filing cabinets. The ETH fraternity then prepares to petition Congress for, you guessed it, public hearings into UFO secrecy, and so on.

This process, following a regular cycle, has been going on since at least 1960 and can be guaranteed to go on for the foreseeable future.

Does anything similar ever happen in the UK at election time? Does anything similar happen in any other country? I strongly suspect the answer, to both questions, is No.

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MAGONIA Monthly Supplement. Letters and short articles welcome. Letters will be considered for publication unless otherwise indicated. Please send all contributions to the Editor: John Harney, 27 Enid Wood House, High Street, Bracknell, Berkshire RG12 1LN UK ☎/Fax: 01344 482709 e-mail: harney@harneyj.freemove.co.uk

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